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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000702

SIPDIS

STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: NEW RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR PROPOSES CLOSER COOPERATION

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey Jacobson, Ambassador, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a courtesy call on the Ambassador, the newly arrived Russian Ambassador said Russia's chief interest in Tajikistan was maintaining stability and asked about Tajik and U.S. concerns about possibly greater activity of the Taliban in the north. He proposed greater coordination and cooperation between our Missions on common goals. He said the Tajiks were wary of him because of his past role regarding Russian policy in South Ossetia/Georgia. He spoke about Russian plans in hydropower including doubts about the Roghun project, problems at Sangtuda, and intentions towards additional projects including a possible dam on the Pyanj river border with Afghanistan. End Summary.

GEORGIAN CONNECTION

12. (C) Making an introductory courtesy call on the Ambassador on June 4, recently arrived Russian Ambassador Yuri Popov noted ruefully that he thought the two and a half months it took for him to Agremont was a record for Ambassadors between CSTO countries. He attributed this to his past role vis a vis South Ossetia, saying he that when he presented his credentials he asked the President directly about the delay, and that President replied "We are against separatism." Although he wondered whether it may have been due to his previous assignment in Uzbekistan, according to Popov, Rahmon said he hoped that Popov's Uzbek experience would be useful in building ties between the two countries. Noting that relations between Dushanbe and Moscow were already a bit cooler than usual following remarks by President Medvedev about the rights of downstream countries in energy projects and the attention to the murder of a Tajik migrant worker, the wariness engendered by his association with last year's events in the Caucasus made repairing relations more challenging. As an example, he said that during a recent interview with Asia Plus the reporter asked him if Russia would bomb Tajik territory to protect Russian citizens (of which there are an estimated 60,000 in Tajikistan) if the Taliban were to infiltrate Gorno-Badakshan. When he dismissed the question as ridiculous, the reporter said "Well, we all know about your previous association with Georgia."

STABILITY IN TAJIKISTAN

13. (C) Popov said Russia's main interest in Tajikistan was supporting stability. Russia considered spillover from events in Afghanistan and Pakistan as the main threat. He asked whether we thought the Tajiks were seriously concerned about possible Taliban incursions North and our own opinion. Ambassador shared Rahmon's perspective on the Taliban from his April meeting with A/S Boucher (ie., we never trusted them and never will) and also noted episodes over the last 18 months where local strongmen or former opposition figures tested the limits of their authority vis a vis the central government. Popov said Russia was concerned about rising instability both from extremists originating in the south and also the ongoing disputes on water, borders and other issues between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. (Note: Many observers here feel that Russia is blowing the threat of instability out of proportion; portraying Tajikistan as weak helps justify the continuing presence of the Russian base, and infighting between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan potentially increases Russia's influence.)

14. (C) Popov identified continued antagonism between Uzbek President Karimov and President Rahmon as another fact potentially threatening stability. He said that Russian was reluctant to see Rogun proceed to quickly, because if antagonized Karimov could easily destabilize Tajikistan. He cited a "fifth column" of ethnic Uzbeks in Tajikistan, and said Kaimov could cut off all trade and energy transit "suffocating" Tajikistan if he chose. He thought only the departure of one President or the other would allow the two countries to establish a normal relationship.

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15. (C) After going over our main areas of cooperation with the Tajiks, Popov asked whether we were not concerned that our obsession with human rights and opening up political space might not be potential destabilizing or allow the growth of extremism. Ambassador replied that we held the opposite belief: increasing pressure on moderate Islam can in fact drive religious practice underground where it may become radicalized; further, the government erodes its credibility with religious believers.

COOPERATION IN DUSHANBE

16. (C) Popov and Ambassador both agreed that there are enough areas of mutual interest that we should cooperate wherever possible, and avoid giving the Tajiks an opportunity to play one against another. Ambassador told Popov that a recent donor conference convoked by State Economic Advisor to the President Davlatov and attended by most of Tajikistan's economic team, the Russian chair sat empty. This absence of coordination allows Davlatov and others to tell Western donors: "If we don't get it from you, we'll get it from Russia." Popov jokingly noted that the Russians currently have a cash flow problem. Ambassador raised the INL-funded Joint Information Center as an example where messages get garbled between Dushanbe and capitals. Ambassador said the project, through which we plan to renovate, equip, and financially support a center where various law and security agencies in Tajikistan can share information on criminal activities, and which will eventually connect to the CARICC project in Kazakhstan, had been briefed several times to the Border International Group, in which the Russian Embassy participates. However, in Moscow, Vienna and Washington, Russian officials had complained about U.S. efforts to build an "intelligence center." Because of Russian complaints, we'd had to delink our project from OSCE plans to work with the Center on training in the future. Popov thought for a moment, and said "Is there room for Russia to participate?" Ambassador said that

we were committed to developing the Center, but future collaboration with other governments would be up to the Tajiks. From our perspective, it could certainly be useful.

HYDROPOWER

¶17. (C) Ambassador asked Popov about the status of Roghun and Sangtuda Popov characterized the Russian position on Roghun as "go slow." He dismissed Tajik government assertions that it will build Roghun itself or with an international consortium, repeatedly referring to it as "our project." He noted, however, that Russia had to take all elements into account, especially the interests of the downstream countries. Even the World Bank, he noted, is not ready to "rush headlong" into the project.

¶18. (C) On Sangtuda, he said that the fourth aggregate "might not be ready" by the proposed Medvedev ribbon cutting at the end of July. He also noted problems with payments - so far, the first three aggregates are producing electricity, but "no one is paying for it." He said, "off the record," that the Tajiks were not anxious for the construction to be completed because then it would be harder to avoid payment. The debt currently stands at some USD 18 million, which the Tajiks have no money to pay. If they couldn't meet their debt, Popov said, there would have to be some other negotiated compromise. Ambassador asked if this meant a change in ownership structure, to which Popov replied, "possibly." He noted that the dam needed repair because it was already leaking. Popov confirmed a previous comment by Russian DCM Svetlichniy that Russia was considering building three medium-capacity hydro stations in Tajikistan.

¶19. (C) Popov told Ambassador that Russia had information that Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan might form some sort of coalition to "work against the downstream countries." He said there were plans to build a major hydropower station on the

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Pyanzh river, and that "America has some role in this." Ambassador explained that the Tajiks had long wanted the U.S. government to build a hydropower station at Dosti-Jhum, but that the United States saw this as an issue for the private sector, and that Tajikistan's business environment would have to improve dramatically to attract such investment. Russia's own experience with Sangtuda was an example of the problem. Ambassador noted that the U.S. government cannot tell private companies where to invest. "Your private companies are more private than ours," Popov responded.

¶10. (C) PERSONAL NOTES: Popov has, on previous occasions, told Ambassador of his childhood in the United States and his hope to one day see America and Russia working together on issues of real substance. He can be a bit over the top in deploying his completely fluent English: "Our countries will always have competition in this region, but I look at you, and want to see you succeed." He enjoys jumping back and forth between substantive comments and teasing, tongue-in-cheek references to color revolutions and the Great Game. We will, however, take him at his word on his offer of greater collaboration locally.

JACOBSON